



Present and Future of Cultural Heritage Policies in Central America

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| 内容記述 | この博士論文は内容の要約のみの公開（または一部非公開）になっています |
| year | 2017 |
| その他のタイトル | 中米諸国における文化遺産政策の現状と今後 |
| 学位授与大学 | 筑波大学 (University of Tsukuba) |
| 学位授与年度 | 2017 |
| 報告番号 | 12102甲第8391号 |
| URL | http://hdl.handle.net/2241/00150045 |

Present and Future of Cultural Heritage Policies in Central America

中米諸国における文化遺産政策の現状と今後

by

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ABSTRACT

As a bridge between North and South America that provides a path to cross from one ocean to another, Central America has historically been an important passageway. The various groups of people who have inhabited and transited this region left rich and diverse evidence of their activities, evidence that continues to live on and develop. Preserving their heritage is important to understand key events in the history of mankind, from the pre-Columbian history, going over the colonization of Latin America, until current relevant topics such as the migration that resulted out of civil conflicts. However, this heritage lies divided into the countries that compose the region today, who have radically different conditions, concepts, and management styles.

As globalization continues to advance rapidly and migration rates increase in the region, the future of cultural heritage in Central America becomes especially susceptible to internal and external factors of change. To provide realistic strategies for the future development of Central American cultural heritage, its current cultural heritage policies need to be understood in detail.

In this thesis, I aimed to study the development and the mechanisms of cultural heritage policies in Central American countries from a regional perspective to provide useful information on these issues.

Through the qualitative case study approach, I analyzed the cultural heritage policies of the six officially Spanish-speaking countries located between Mexico and Colombia: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. I addressed each country as a case, and building on the results, I created a 'case' of the whole Central American region.

The following results were drawn for each country:

After suffering a 36-year-long civil war, **Guatemala** redefined its heritage protection by addressing heritage holistically and by shifting from conservation to the political role of social inclusion. This shift was influenced by the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous

Peoples. Despite aiming to unify the Guatemalan people with intangible heritage declarations and through a new cultural policy, the Ministry of Culture and Sports divided its functions into “arts” (related to “white” culture) and heritage (related to pre-Columbian and indigenous expressions). The superficial performance on intangible heritage and the strong presence of the popular tourist destination Tikal distances heritage from the Guatemalan people. Furthermore, the influence of external actors was found to be especially strong in Guatemala, as the World Heritage sites are given priority in the constitution, and the heritage protection law has its origins in the Spanish Protection Law and other international treaties.

In **El Salvador**, cultural heritage policies were paralyzed during the 12-year-old civil war. In the early 1990s, with the end of the war, substantial changes were made in the cultural sector: the government created an organizational body (CONCULTURA), the Special Protection Law for the Cultural Heritage of El Salvador, joined UNESCO and inscribed a site on the World Heritage List. The recentness of these changes has rendered a relatively contemporary perspective, allowing for a holistic approach that includes intangible heritage. However, it has also allowed for little consolidation time, and as of 2017, disputes and political pressures still disrupt long-time projects that involve culture. The 2009 triumph of the left-wing FMLN party led to a similar shift in heritage as the one experienced in Guatemala: from conservation to a focus on identity building and on support for the civil society. This shift, coupled with the lack of monumental sites, led to the delegation of much of the heritage-related duties to the “Dr. David J. Guzmán” Museum.

The concept of heritage in El Salvador is tightly bound to archaeology, to the point that might narrow the possibilities of heritage in the vision of decision-makers. Insecurity and the relation of the “Dr. David J. Guzmán” Museum to the upper class hinder the equal access to heritage in El Salvador.

Heritage legislation and management started remarkably early (as early as 1845) in **Honduras** as a response to looting, excavations, and trade carried out by foreign explorers. Although the Honduran heritage has been historically celebrated, it lost its momentum, especially during the last decade. The 2009 coup d'état and the 2014 austerity measures affected the organization and minimized the budget for culture. Furthermore, Honduras has been struggling with its concept of heritage: the monumental presence of Copán has rendered the idea that Honduran

heritage is equal to Mayan heritage. Despite continuous efforts at amplifying this idea, the struggle continues between concentrating on Copán to secure financial income on the one hand and widening the Honduran image of heritage on the other. In any case, heritage rarely goes beyond pre-Columbian assets: colonial and republican historic buildings have already suffered damage and remain unattended. Honduras is the country with the second lowest budget and the most unstable conditions for culture in this study.

In the case of **Nicaragua**, the triumph of the leftist Sandinista Revolution that came out of the civil war rendered important transformations for the cultural sector in the 1980s. The creation of the Ministry of Culture (which became the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture), the Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation and the signing of the World Heritage Convention are a few examples of the profound transformations. Culture and cultural heritage were given importance again with the democratic win of the Sandinistas in 2006. Today, the FSLN remains in office, and cultural heritage policies have gained a particularly strong connection to the government with a clear ideological left-wing direction that targets decentralization and inclusiveness. Thus, the concept of heritage developed in Nicaragua is unique: archaeology is not as important as in the rest of the region, as the focus is placed on colonial, political, or popular culture.

The soft authoritarian government provided high stability and increased income for culture, but it also raises the question of what future cultural heritage will have if political conditions change or if they intensify. The politicized policies also raise the question of the importance of democracy and representativeness for cultural heritage.

In **Costa Rica**, the lack of civil turmoil (civil wars and dictatorships) experienced by neighboring countries has allowed for a favorable political and social environment. Although cultural heritage development was particularly slow at the beginning, the creation of the Ministry of Culture and Youth provided a solid structure, widened the concept of heritage and pushed for specialized legislation. The lack of monumental sites led to a concentration of heritage responsibilities in the National Museum. Although this institution manages heritage, the concept of heritage is decentralized, leading to a lack of an overarching national symbolism. Cultural heritage legislation is divided into laws that target either pre-Columbian/Colonial heritage (era-based) or immovable (typology-based) heritage. This division generates gaps and

discrepancies in the protection of cultural heritage, and oversimplifies the concept of heritage, placing excessive importance on the colonization period.

In the case of **Panama**, the dictatorship eras that spanned from 1968 to 1989 placed great importance in cultural heritage. This importance is seen in the creation of the INAC, the National Historic Heritage Section (DNPH), and the Measures on the Custody, Conservation, and Management of the Historic Heritage of the Nation. Indigenous, popular, and folkloric cultural heritage were highlighted, opposing them to the “hegemonic, white, oppressive” United States. This development rendered an independent character that is still relatively free from influences such as UNESCO. After the end of the Noriega dictatorship with the US Invasion, a slow decline in the importance of the cultural sector began.

Recently, the rapidly growing tourism industry has concentrated resources in the popular tourist destination Casco Antiguo. This has brought about a decline in other assets, such as Portobelo-San Lorenzo and the national museums. Today, Panama focuses on economic growth, so that heritage projects that target infrastructure, policies that support tourism development or programs for international appeal are given priority. Despite these opportunities, heritage programs have been hindered by constant administrative changes and corruption.

As for the regional case, the situational analysis demonstrated that even though many similarities are found in the national events and conditions, many differences coexist as well. The comparison parameters showed some common challenges of the region: “politization,” the use of cultural heritage (especially intangible heritage) for social inclusion, the centralization of heritage either in sites or museums, and the relation between spending and stability in the cultural field. Based on the sub-regional parameters, the region was divided into three sub-regions: the first is composed of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and Nicaragua, as the four countries share many characteristics. The second and third “sub-regions” are Costa Rica and Panama, who had a distinctive development of their heritage on their own. These sub-regions match the political divisions of the past, namely the division into the Mesoamerican region and the Isthmo-Colombian Area. The monumental Mayan heritage has accounted for influence factors such as foreign explorers, early heritage protection laws, centralization of sites (Copán and Tikal), and a strong presence of indigenous people (who are not only restricted to the Mayans). The great presence of indigenous people (also experienced in Panama) influenced

the development of civil wars and the “politization” of cultural heritage that came of these wars. Furthermore, large amounts of indigenous people today have influenced the development of social inclusion and intangible cultural heritage. The division between Costa Rica and Panama could be explained by the limits of Captaincy General of Guatemala during Colonial times. Panama became an independent nation until seven decades after the other five countries. This led to a very different development of cultural heritage policies. While the presence of indigenous people and the dictatorship eras draw parallels to the northern triangle, the US presence in the Canal accounted for different characteristics. This is because the rivalry to the US led to early policies that intended to unify the Panamanians, by appealing to national uniqueness and identity.

Securing autonomy, going beyond pre-Columbian and colonial heritage, and addressing national realities in the national cultural heritage policies were the observed challenges shared in the region.

Drawing on these results, some recommendations were made regarding regional strategies for cultural heritage development in Central America.

This study provides observations that are expected to be significant for researchers, decision-makers, and for international cooperation agencies, since they contribute to the understudied theme of Central American cultural heritage policies. The national and regional approaches that include context and in-depth detail should account for a comprehensive understanding of present and future of the region’s cultural heritage.